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TAGS:PREL, OEXC, PGOV, NO
SUBJECT: NORWAY CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADER ERNA SOLBERG DISCUSSES
NOBEL, ARCTIC, AFGHANISTAN WITH AMBASSADOR

REFS: OSLO 778

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Erna Solberg, leader of the Conservative ("Hoyre") Party (the second largest opposition party in Norway after the right-wing Progress Party) told Ambassador White on December 15 that many Norwegians were favorably impressed by President Obama's direct message in his Nobel speech, that Norway needs to be careful in business dealings with the Russians, that the Conservative Party and the Progress Party have difficulty presenting a united opposition to PM Stoltenbergs Red-Green coalition because of fundamental disagreements about immigration and spending, and that the Conservatives believe the Norwegian armed forces are underfunded and understaffed. End Summary

Obama's Nobel Prize

¶12. (U) The Ambassador made an initial courtesy call December 15 on Erna Solberg, leader of the Conservative ("Hoyre") Party, at her office in parliament, accompanied by poloff and pol LES. The meeting started with a discussion about the President's visit and the Nobel Peace Prize. Mrs. Solberg quipped playfully that the previous week had been "Obamarama." She did not offer comment on the appropriateness of the prize, saying that it was the Nobel Committee's decision. She said that she thought many Norwegians were favorably surprised by the President's direct speech. She commented that only a few on the left had thought it was too much about war and too little about peace.

Women in Norwegian Politics

¶13. (U) The Ambassador said he was impressed by the level of female participation in Norwegian politics, and Solberg stated that the fact that five out of seven party leaders are women shows that the Norwegian society is egalitarian and independent.

Energy / Lofoten / The Arctic / Russia

¶14. (U) The Ambassador told Solberg about the energy-related trips he has already made: with Energy Secretary Chu to the Mongstad facility in western Norway, and with Minister of Trade and Industry Trond Giske to view the Snohvit liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility in Hammerfest in northern Norway. The two discussed whether or not carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) is viable or not. They talked about how shale gas may become an increasingly important source of natural gas in the United States over the coming years, that its use could have energy security implications, and that Statoil has an installation in Maryland.

¶15. (SBU) The Ambassador asked Solberg if potential exploration off the protected Lofoten-Vesteraalen coastal area could become a game-changing political issue affecting the Red-Green coalition's unity. Solberg responded that, for its part, Hoyre wants to open the fields off the islands for exploration, but would like to listen to the fisheries associations and other parties involved in terms of

the most vulnerable areas.

¶6. (SBU) On Arctic policy, Solberg said that the GON's High North policy, first articulated by then Foreign Minister Jan Petersen (now Norwegian Ambassador to Austria) had unanimous support in the Storting. As the ice caps are melting, new areas will be opened up for oil and gas exploration. Energy, environment, and Norwegian-Russian relations were of most concern. She pointed out the need to follow closely development in Russia's Shtokman field. Furthermore, she mentioned Norwegian communications giant Telenor's strife in Russian courts over its involvement in Russian-based VimpelCom. The lesson learned from this is that Norway needs to be careful when dealing with the Russians, both in business and other matters, said Solberg.

Relations with the U.S. and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly

¶7. (U) Mrs. Solberg emphasized the good relations between her party and the U.S., telling the Ambassador about her latest trip to the U.S. in early December which included, among other things, a visit to the National War College in Washington, D.C. She also mentioned that she will be going to Memphis, Tennessee in March at the invitation of the President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Congressman John Tanner (D-TN). Lightheartedly, she said that she was looking forward to a BBQ in Graceland. (The last NATO Parliamentary Assembly session took place in Oslo in May 2009 and the next session will take place in Riga, Latvia from 28 May to 1 June 2010.)

Domestic Politics Issues: Cracks in the Red-Green Coalition

¶8. (SBU) Solberg was disappointed that the Red-Green Stoltenberg

government won reelection, but noticed that there are internal battles within the coalition. She said that necessary financial and budget "cutbacks will be very hard for this coalition" and that the government will experience problems keeping the balance sheet in order as less oil money will be available in the next few years. She looked forward to the 2011 midterm local elections, predicting that fundamental issues like immigration, sick leave reform and competitiveness for Norwegian industry would be key issues. Sick leave figures in Norway are steadily increasing to some of the worst levels in Europe, and PM Stoltenberg has a great challenge in alleviating this without upsetting the labor unions. Solberg said that competitiveness of Norwegian business and industry is another issue that will continue to worsen. There is low unemployment and wages have increased every year since 2005. "Where is Norway's competitive advantage?" asked Solberg. Solberg was concerned that R&D investment and university funding are not as good as they should be due to the current government's funding priorities.

Conservative Party vs. Progress Party

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador asked about the relationship between the Progress Party and the Conservative Party. Solberg explained that although the working relationship is now good, there had been "longstanding difficulties." Former Progress Party leader Carl I. Hagen, who still works as an external advisor for the party, had as his stated mission to completely replace the Conservatives as the party of the right. Furthermore, she said that the Conservatives have had to be, and must continue to be, careful in their relationship with FRP as the Conservative Party's constituents are divided as to whether they want to work with the Progress Party or not. The two parties share a desire for lower taxes and a friendliness toward private industry, but clash on two key issues: (1) the Progressives are an "expenditure party" that wants to spend more government (oil) money on social services, and (2) the way the Progressives talk about immigrants is highly problematic. Some Progressive Party politicians speak about immigrants using group terminology, and the Progressives' nationalistic tendencies are viewed with alarm by many Conservative Party voters. She also noted that the Conservatives and the Progressives just had, combined, their best election result ever, and they only received 40% of the vote. Therefore, to be in the majority, they must cooperate with the smaller parties in the center of the political spectrum, many of whose voters are also highly suspicious of the Progressives, and who

might cooperate in a minority government with the Conservatives but not a majority government with both the Conservatives and the Progressives.

Immigration

¶10. (SBU) Solberg then went on to speak energetically about immigration, explaining how Norway in the period between 1974 to 1976 had open borders, whereas today labor immigration from Eastern Europe (Poland and Lithuania in particular) and immigrants that enter through family reunification and asylum make up the vast majority of new immigrants (Comment: Note that in Norway, about 50% of all immigrants are asylees/refugees. End Comment.) She also touched upon the issue of cheap labor from Eastern Europe, stating that over 100,000 people had come to Norway over the last five years, and that this has caused insecurity in the market for low-skill and low-paid jobs, much to the labor unions' frustration. She also touched upon the problems that first generation immigrants have in adjusting to living within Norwegian society, and the issue of forced/arranged marriages, which she characterized as "a big issue."

Defense / Afghanistan / Iran

¶11. (SBU) The Ambassador asked about the Conservatives' view on Afghanistan. It is the Conservatives' view, Solberg said, that Norway needs a larger army in the long term—"at least another brigade." Afghanistan is an example of the fact that Norwegian troops are stretched too thin and where the government clearly prefers providing other types of assistance. Solberg said that the government's Afghan policy, which involves increased funding for development and civilian assistance, is troublesome. The government, trying to make sure that the "sacred, political" one percent of GNP goes to Overseas Development Assistance, drives its decision to commit funding to training the Afghan national police, but not enough to training the Afghan army.

¶12. (SBU) Solberg said that Iran is not debated much in the Norwegian public because there is no national political "clash" on the issue; it is more an issue discussed among academics. She added that she thought that it important to get the UN, as well as China and Russia, on "our side" in terms of a coherent Iran policy.

Educational Exchange / Entrepreneurship

¶13. (U) The Ambassador aired a few ideas that could strengthen the relations between Norway and the U.S. Bringing back funding for Norwegian student's Freshman Year in American colleges would be one excellent way of stimulating educational exchange. Solberg explained the policy behind the GON withdrawal of funding for Freshman Year study abroad, saying that it could take a while to achieve any change since the level of education in Freshman Year did not match the Norwegian criterion for first year of college. She emphasized the need for more educational exchanges: "Youths today were born after the fall of the Berlin Wall and have little or no knowledge of recent history like the Kosovo war or even 9/11." Thus, future generations need to be better educated. The trans-Atlantic connection is weakened and needs to be strengthened, she said.

¶14. (U) The Ambassador informed Ms. Solberg about the 2010 Presidential Entrepreneurship Summit where Norwegian minority entrepreneurs would be invited to attend. Solberg noted that encouraging entrepreneurship among minorities was something she had worked on when she was a cabinet minister from 2001 to 2005.

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